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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001558

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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/22/2029
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [SA](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDIS CONTINUE TO ROOT OUT HOUTHIS "INFILTRATORS"
AS ATTENTION TURNS TO THE HAJJ

REF: A. RIYADH 1547
[1](#)B. RIYADH 1524
[1](#)C. RIYADH 1507
[1](#)D. RIYADH 1495
[1](#)E. RIYADH 1491
[1](#)F. RIYADH 1490
[1](#)G. SANAA 2079

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) While the SAG is loudly proclaiming "mission accomplished" and publicly focusing its attention on the Hajj and providing for IDPs (septel), military operations are continuing along both sides of the Yemeni border. In recent days, air and artillery attacks targeted Houthi positions while ground forces conducted "combing" operations in the border regions. Naval patrols have reportedly sunk two vessels inside Saudi territorial waters amid media reports that foreign fighters from the Horn of Africa may be involved in the conflict. While media coverage of the continuing military operations is more subdued, the soldiers themselves are being loudly feted as defenders of the homeland and the Hajj. In the absence of a negotiated truce between the Houthis and the ROYG, Saudi Military operations will likely continue throughout the Hajj season; however, they will remain limited and low-profile, and aimed at containment.
END SUMMARY.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED, JUST MOPPING UP...

[1](#)2. (U) Following King Abdullah's announcement that all infiltrators had been "removed" from the Kingdom (ref A), the local media has reduced its coverage of fighting along the border and begun to portray continuing operations as "mopping up." On November 15, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat reported that a large number of military reinforcements had been moved to the Jizan province to support existing operations and assist with border security. In the same article, a "Saudi military source" said Saudi authorities were "seriously considering" destroying abandoned houses and buildings in the border

region close to the military zone to prevent the "infiltrators" from having access to hideouts and storage areas in the future. Arab News quoted military sources on November 22 as saying the conflict "would not last long," and detailed the military's efforts to find and secure these Houthi "hideouts." Jeddah-based daily Okaz reported Saudi artillery bombardments of border locations "in retaliation" to machine-gun fire emanating from the Yemeni side on November 22.

CROSSING THE LINE

¶3. (S/NF) While both the SAG and ROYG continue to insist they are not conducting cross-border operations, NGA imagery from November 19 showed two Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) F-15 aircraft returning from positions 4.5km inside the Yemeni border. The presence of RSAF forces inside Yemeni airspace suggests that Saudi forces may be conducting air raids against Houthi rebels inside Yemen in spite of these denials.

Imagery also indicates that as of November 20 additional ground forces had been deployed to the border regions, including elements of the 10th mechanized infantry and 1st airborne brigades (COMMENT: Assistant Minister of Defense Khalid bin Sultan's various statements during recent meetings in Washington regarding whether the Saudis were conducting operations on the Yemeni side of the border further muddy the issue. He said on the one hand that the King had authorized the use of force against the infiltrators with the proviso that Saudi forces would not go "even one meter" into Yemeni territory. However, he also said that Saudi forces had established a "kill zone" ten kilometers inside Yemeni territory. It would seem difficult to maintain such a buffer

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zone inside Yemeni territory without at least some limited operations on the Yemeni side of the border. While the difficult terrain and poorly defined border might cause RSAF forces to stray into Yemeni air space, the RSAF may also be conducting limited "defensive" sorties inside Yemeni airspace. While we expect to see some limited air activity, we do not expect to see Saudi ground forces pushing across the mountainous border region and into Yemen. END COMMENT.)

TWO IF BY SEA...

¶4. (U) A Royal Saudi Naval Force (RSNF) source told Saudi Gazette on November 20 that RSNF helicopters sunk two vessels that had failed to respond to warnings after entering Saudi waters. According to the source, air patrollers issued repeated warnings to the vessels to halt and were forced to strike when those warnings went unheeded. "We will not let any vessel penetrate one inch of Saudi waters," the source said, "and we have orders to strike with an iron fist." The reported increase in coastal patrols by the RSNF and coast guard is in part a reaction to the perceived threat of maritime smugglers supplying the Houthis with weapons and ammunition. Al-Sharq Al-Awsat reported that the "infiltrators" had been repeatedly frustrated in their attempts to seize the port of Midi on Yemen's north coast, adding that the RSNF "blockade" was "tantamount to a lethal blow" in that it cut off the Houthis access to weapons and supplies.

CONTROLLING THE MESSAGE

¶5. (U) While lower-profile military operations are likely to continue throughout the Hajj, the SAG appears intent on making sure information surrounding these operations is tightly controlled and portrays Saudi forces in the most positive light. According to a November 22 Al-Sharq Al-Awsat

article, the Saudi military was continuing its efforts to stand up a "media office" in the city of Jazan to assist the media in covering the conflict. In addition, they had appointed a spokesperson to deal with the media and distributed "special equipment" to reporters, including helmets.

FOREIGNERS HELPING THE HOUTHIS?

¶6. (C) Reports are also surfacing that foreigners-- mainly from the Horn of Africa, although other nationalities have been implicated as well-- are participating in the conflict. In a November 20 Al-Sharq Al-Awsat article, an unnamed source accused the Houthis of forcing Somali and other East African nationals to help dig trenches and act as military reinforcements.

¶7. (C) On November 19, Somali radio station Jowhar broadcast a report saying that the SAG had arrested a number of Somalis and Ethiopians for fighting alongside the Houthis. On November 21, the Yemen Observer reported that 26 Somalis were arrested by the Yemeni Ministry of Defense in Saada. (COMMENT: Neither of these reports has been confirmed; however, there is a long history of East African immigrants living and working in Northern Yemen. These immigrants have been implicated in cross-border smuggling of people or contraband in the past, and it is possible that some might be helping the tribes in these areas. END COMMENT.)

ANOTHER HEZBOLLAH?

¶8. (C) Allegations of Iranian support for the Houthis continue unabated, and suggestions of a Hezbollah connection--or at least pro-Hezbollah sympathies--are now entering the mix (ref G). Kuwaiti daily Al-Siyasah reported on November 21 that "a tribal source" reported seeing the

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Houthis "raise the flags of Hezbollah" and display pictures of Hasan Nasrallah. Some post contacts have begun to draw their own parallels. In a November 18 meeting with Poloff, an Egyptian diplomat said that while the SAG had expressed doubts about the Yemeni government's capacity to carry out development projects, they did not want to allow NGOs or other international groups in the area to assist with reconstruction. The Saudis were convinced this would "open the door for Iran to come in," he explained, just as they had done in Lebanon via Hezbollah. Assistant Defense Minister Khalid bin Sultan also reportedly encouraged USG officials to view the Houthis as "the new Hezbollah." (COMMENT: While the Houthis and Hezbollah share little ideological ground, Nasrallah's more general appeal as a "resistance figure" in the region appears to be growing. As such, the Houthis might look to Hezbollah as an inspiration and model irrespective of these ideological differences. END COMMENT.)

BACK TO THE FRONT

¶10. (U) The reports that continue to trickle in from the front celebrate the achievements of the victorious Saudi forces, catalogue their modern military arsenal, and depict soldiers literally waving the flag and singing songs of national pride--pride derived, in large part, from their role in protecting the land of the Two Holy Mosques. A "military source" quoted in a November 22 Okaz article said that "morale of our Armed Forces is high, and their willpower stronger, particularly with the advent of the Hajj season...the valiant soldiers have declared their willingness to sacrifice every drop of blood to maintain the stability of their country, protect its holy places, and the guests of

God's holy house."

¶11. (U) A November 22 Arab News article reported King Abdullah's decision to posthumously promote soldiers who died in battles with "the Yemeni infiltrators" and to give their families the maximum allowable welfare benefits. In addition, wounded soldiers would receive an SR100,000 (USD26,667) payout and be promoted to the next highest rank. The Saudi Gazette reported the same day that army units could be observed singing "songs of victory and national pride," adding that Saudi composer Khaled Al-Sayfi had recorded a song in support of the soldiers. Al-Sayfi reportedly "wanted to send a message from the Saudi public to show our appreciation for the heroic deeds of the soldiers on the Saudi-Yemeni border."

COMMENT:

¶12. (C) As the Hajj approaches, the SAG's public focus is shifting from the fighting in Jizan to the SAG's security preparations aimed at protecting pilgrims (ref A). However these two goals--protecting the Saudi nation and protecting the adherents of Islam--are offered as two sides of the same coin. By celebrating the soldiers, the flag, and country, the SAG is taking advantage of this opportunity to develop the military-patriotic dimension of Saudi Arabia's religiously-centered sense of national identity. At the same time, they remain conscious that military action needs to be justified in religious terms, particularly during this holy month, and are likely to resist any visible escalation to the confrontation. In the absence of a negotiated truce between the Houthis and the ROYG, Saudi military operations will continue throughout the Hajj season; however, they will remain limited and low-profile, and aimed at containment.
END COMMENT.
SMITH